



Marius Benta

Mud-Covered Filthy Creatures

(Five Stories)

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ALSO BY MARIUS BENTA

BOOKS

Povestea povestită nu e povestea adevărată
(in Romanian)

PLAYS

The Story You Can Tell is Not the True Story
The Assassination of the Marquis de Sade
Someone's Knocking

SHORT SCRIPTS

City Break
Faint Stroke
The Fourth City
Cercan

Marius Benta is a journalist and bilingual writer (Romanian and English). Two of his plays, *The Assassination of the Marquis de Sade* and *Someone's Knocking*, were staged for the first time at Cluj city's National Theatre in 2010, and the same year his first book was published by Bybliotek Publishing House. Marius Benta has worked in the cities of Cluj and Bucharest with several broadcasting companies, such as NCN, BBC, Pro FM, or Radio Guerrilla.

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CERCAN¹

I'm waiting.

She's a bit plump.

Two minutes. You only have two minutes.

But her teasing smile makes her rather sexy.

To grab that phone and call. A minute and fifty seconds. It's an easy word. You just pick up those letters: C, E, R, and so on, six letters altogether, and just mix them up. I want a different word. The name of a sign.

She's comfortable in front of the camera.

A constellation. And you win five hundred bucks. Is this a difficult question for five hundred bucks? It's super easy, I tell you. Come on. I'm waiting. One minute to go now. Think. What's the sign? Is it the Capricorn? Is it the Crawfish? It might be your own sign, you know? Or my own sign. You just need to grasp that phone and dial nine two, seven five, nine five, six five, and tell me that six-letter word. Come on. A six-letter word. For five hundred bucks. Look. Before time runs out, I have a surprise

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for you. I know you're there, I'm absolutely certain that you're there and you hear me. And I want to offer you something really special tonight. Pick up that phone, dial nine two, seven five, nine five, six five, and tell me the answer to this anagram. Tell me the name of the sign you get if you mix up the letters on the screen. The name of the sign. And you get, well, you get a very special gift tonight. It's a chance you've never had before. And you'll never have again if you miss it this time. A very special gift. Worth more than five hundred bucks. Have no doubt about that. Dial nine two, seven five, nine five, six five. Now. And I'm going to dance for you. That's right. I want to dance for you tonight. You only have to call. And tell me a word. Just a word. A six-letter-word. A sign. A constellation. How does it look like, this constellation? A human being? An animal? Look, I'll give you a hint. It's an animal. It's the sign of an animal. A creature. Do you think it's a fish? A shellfish? A mammal? Think. Look, I'm going to tell you another secret. It's my own sign. It's indeed the sign I was born under. I know you're there, watching me. I want to dance for you tonight. Not tomorrow, not the day after tomorrow. Now. Here. Tonight. This is your only chance to see me dancing. You just need to answer the quiz. I'm waiting for a call from you. A call. I want you to call. Now. Grab that phone and call. Nine two, seven five, nine five, six five. I'm waiting. Nine two, seven five, nine five, six five. I'm waiting. It's not like I'm going to wait an eternity here, you know? You need to call now. I know you're there. I know you're watching me. I know you're there. Nine two, seven five, nine five, six five. All right, the five-hundred-quid thing was dumb, okay? Not that

I couldn't give you five hundred quid. I do have five hundred quid. But really, I wish I offered you something special. Isn't special enough the gift I'm offering you here? I've never danced for you, you know that.

Dancing is kind of mystical, isn't it? There's something, there's a sort of particular intimacy when you dance for someone, don't you think? You give them more than just the beauty of your body. You kind of give yourself altogether, don't you? And it's different from when you make love, isn't it? It's different.

Her accusatory eyes are mute.

How many times have I asked you anything? I can count it on my fingers. Well, this time I really need it. I really need to talk to you, don't you get it? This is important. I have to know what you want from me. How can I make you call?

She's smoking now. Is her cigarette trembling?

I don't deserve this, you know? After all you've done to me, your silence is the last thing I deserve. All right, it's not like you've damped loads of shit on me. You've only done one thing. But whoa, that was enough, believe me. And you know, this isn't even about pain. I don't give a shit that it hurts. It's that I don't understand why you did it to me. I don't understand what you want from me. Your silence hurts more. I'm waiting for a call now. For an explanation. Before it's too late. I know you're there.

She's going to dance soon.

I want to hear that phone ringing.

She will stop crying.

I want to hear that phone ringing.

She will regain her composure.

I want to hear that phone ringing!

She will remain silent for a while.

I want to hear that phone ringing!

*Then she will dance. A passionate, violent, disordered, and
jerky dance.*

See, this whole thing was not supposed to sound like this. It was supposed to be a prayer, you know? That's right, I wanted this to be a kind of a genuine prayer. But look where I am now. God.

Yes.

MUD-COVERED FILTHY CREATURES

From a certain point on, you forget that you're walking. Your feet get disconnected from your brain, and they begin doing their work on their own, silently, while you somehow get busy with other things, such as pondering your so-far unsolved businesses, lingering on images from the movie you saw last night, or half-closing your eyes and just relaxing without thinking of anything in particular. The heavy burden on your shoulders is still there, yet you've turned comfortable with it, as if the two of you — you and your burden — are now supporting each other, because, when you have the right angle with your upper body, the rucksack turns into a nice propulsion system that helps you move on. Your body keeps making those little steps forward. And the path follows you.

Everyone seemed enthusiastic when they stepped off that little train, shouting and cracking jokes. Now, after five hours, of which the last three meant a constant march up this harsh country road, no one seems to feel like talking anymore. Everyone knows it's better to try not to stop. If you halt even for a minute, you somehow lose your pace altogether, and your body immediately falls into that sweet state of inappropriate relaxation.

Apart from Pedro, none of them is really used to the mountain. Not surprisingly, Zoe finds it the most difficult to keep up with the group. She is the one who needs to rest often, and she does, and then Emma stops, too, in female solidarity, and in those resting times they chat. Enda refuses to rest, but it's obvious he has a difficult time. Perspiration flows abundantly off his hair, and grimaces of suffering flash on his face every now and then.

The camping isn't big. A dozen of tiny wooden chalets are scattered on the left side of the little river among trees and rocks around the central building. On the right side, in a little clearing, rise a few tents.

Two shared rooms in a chalet will be enough, they agree. In the smaller one will sleep Pedro and Zoe — no erotic disruptions forecasted; in the bigger one will sleep Enda in one bed and Emma with Chris in the other. For shower and toilet, they will have to walk to the main building that also hosts the restaurant.

They all have tea in the restaurant, and eat the sandwiches they have bought in town. They revise the plan for tomorrow's tour: a three-hour walk to The Red Lake, a glacier formation with breath-taking sight, as the guidebook promised. Then they take a nice shower, and go to sleep.

Emma is almost snoring, and Chris steps outside to have his end-of-the-day cigarette. He often enjoys to be alone, but especially here and now in this special place. It's a bit chilly, yet he sits on the entrance step of the little porch wearing only his briefs and socks, trembling a little. He inhales the smoke slowly and deeply, and a strange peace invades his being. The forest — huge, silent, and black — is everywhere on all sides.

'Dao Khe Dao!...' A rusty, mocking voice comes from behind. When she wants to be funny, Zoe talks like cartoon characters.

‘You scared me.’

‘Trying out your new Zen exercise?’ she says as she sits down next to him, a bit too close, without asking may I join. She starts talking about herself and telling him how she loves sitting alone at night. When she wants to be taken seriously, she uses her low, grave register, like a tired big boy who’s just reported a significant street-fight victory.

‘Give us a puff.’ She’s probably testing the limits of his personal space. She has her own cigarettes back in her room, he knows that, yet she wants to smoke from his half-consumed fag, like she’s too lazy to go inside and fumble through her luggage until she finds her pack. He hates that, but can’t say no. When he gets it back, it’s wet. Cold saliva has diffused into the filter, and the smoke tastes different. Little pulsations of anger make their way up his stomach and throat. He grins and mimics he’s interested in whatever she’s telling him, and waits for the burning end of the cigarette to move closer to the filter so he can get on his feet and say good night.

At half seven in the morning they are all up and walking to the bathrooms, soap in their hands and towels on their shoulders. Except for Emma, who feels poorly (nausea and fever), and decides to spend her first day on the mountain in the camp.

‘Sure you’ll be ok?’

‘Don’t worry,’ she says, ‘please go without me and have a good time. I’ll take an aspirin and have a rest in bed till you’re

back.'

Sunshine reaches through the light fog. The ground is wet and the air feels like it's going to be a hot day. Across the river, there's a faint lane by the tent camp that gets lost in the forest. On the trees, there are several signs, which mark the various destinations that can be reached from that point. The group must follow the red circle. They've taken light rucksacks on: just water and food. As they walk, their trail soon becomes impossible to distinguish, and they must find their way only by looking for the markings. Thank God the marking is good. Either on a tree or a boulder, the red circle can always be noticed somewhere ahead. At first, the group is quite compact. Then, as the path becomes more difficult, as they need to jump over fallen trees or climb harsh rocks, their walk becomes rather solitary.

For half an hour, they walk through the forest, going up a hill or down when crossing a valley. At a certain point, they must cross a little river and stop fascinated by the landscape. There's a small waterfall and, perhaps as a result of some recent flood, several huge stones lay in awkward positions, a few trees are broken and two are just contorted, almost upside down, yet still alive. Perhaps because of the waterfall, the scent of fir trees seems stronger here. Over the valley, far away, one can see now other forests and other rocks.

'That's absolutely amazing!' Zoe stops and stares at the waterfall. 'We need to take a shot.' She immediately starts climbing the rocks to frame herself into a possible picture. She finds a comfortable stone to sit on, and casts her hair on her back. The stones are wet. Chris frames her, and pushes the button right

when the sole of Zoe's left foot loses grip with the slippery stone. Chris thinks of the funny shot, which must have caught her sudden expression of not-yet-panic on her face, then realises this isn't funny. Her body rolls down towards a large trunk.

'It's nothing,' she mumbles as he helps her stand up, 'It's nothing, really.' Her clothes are messed up with mud, and she keeps rubbing her left arm.

'Sure?' he says and holds her injured arm, 'Let's sit and have a little rest before we start walking again. Let me see your arm.'

They sit down on a dead trunk, and Zoe unbuttons her boyish red-and-green shirt. There's a reddish area on her arm where the branch hit her.

'I'll survive.' She smiles all of a sudden, and her wide breasts get stiff under her singlet.

Chris pulls out two sandwiches packed in aluminium foil and hands her one.

'Thanks,' she says with the mocking voice of a puppet character of hers, 'You've just saved me, husky lad!' then she bursts into her alert, low-voice laugh.

In lack of a proper joke to answer with, he gives a grin, and takes a bite of his ham-and-gherkins sandwich. She thinks she's beautiful. She thinks she's sexy. He knows that. But she's not. She told him once during a short conversation they had in her kitchen while the others were arguing over musical tastes that she knew she had a special kind of sex-appeal. A year ago, she has stood for a Dutch photographer, and the photos appeared in some international magazine. She knows that her rotund shapes and generous flesh are full of energy and fire, and she could nour-

ish any man's desire. He understands that, and even feels it in the rhythm of his own breath, yet a feeling of disgust persists at the sight of her somewhat vulgar face and her pale skin.

She falls on her back and starts screaming.

'Let's do something weird,' she says. 'Don't you just want to do something weird?'

'Yes. Go back to the camp.'

Flummoxed, she watches him for a second. 'Ha! Not *that* weird! Let's go up the river.'

'What?'

'We'll get to the lake anyway. The river must come off the lake, don't you think? We'll reach the others there, you'll see. You're the kind of guy who always follows the ordinary path? Don't you sometimes feel like you need to try something new, like something gross?'

Yeah, but not now and not with you, he'd like to answer.

'Yeah, but...'

'Come on!' she shouts, and in a second she's perched on a naked white stone in the river bed. 'We're gonna see places that maybe nobody has ever seen, do you realise that? Everyone else follows the sings, and never steps away from the safe path. Come on, it'll be fun!'

First, the climbing is easy, even easier than along the forest path. Most of the stones — some of them incredibly huge — are dry; they just need to step from one onto the other. Every now and then they must jump over a fallen tree or cross it through the forest when the river bed gets really harsh. Suddenly, they find themselves in front of a huge wall, impossible to climb without

special equipment.

‘We could make it through the forest, and keep it as close as possible to the river,’ Zoe says eventually. ‘The beauty of the unexpected, didn’t I tell you?’ she smirks. ‘Don’t worry, we’re nearly there.’

‘Yeah, right. You sense it in your nostrils, don’t you?’

‘No. In my little finger. Besides, we’ve been walking for almost three hours now. They say the lake is a three-hour walk from the chalet.’

‘Yeah, on the normal pathway.’

‘We’re on a short-cut here, so this should take even less’ she mutters, then halts and stares at him.

‘Man, you really *are* worried, aren’t you?’ A drop of water wets her chin. ‘Shit.’ She’s gasping, and he realises that her whole body is wet. She waits for him to come closer, blocking his way. ‘I didn’t mean to make you feel uncomfortable.’

‘Is it raining or what?’ His voice comes from far away, tired and resigned.

Her hand removes a tuff of hair from his face, then continues the movement caressing his head, and stops on his neck.

‘You stink,’ he laughs nervously. A thunderbolt fills with light the whole clearing they now realise they are in.

‘You stink, too. You stink atrociously.’ A thunder follows.

‘You stink like fish sauce,’ he says as he watches her fingers while they unbutton his shirt.

‘You stink like ass hole,’ she says giving herself in to his hand, which fumbles about her warm breasts.

It’s raining, and they roll down, and twist about on the bed

of dead leaves.

‘You’re a dirty bull cow.’ He pants over her lustful body, and smears her with mud all over the face and chest.

Her legs have clenched around his body, and her fingers are squeezing his flesh. They roll again; she gets on top, reaching with her teeth for his underwear. Another flash of light, and their bodies appear all wet and dirty, covered with dead leaves. The forest is dark and her hair is that of a witch.

‘Gotta go back to the camp,’ he says all of a sudden, struggling to escape her embrace. She is busy working on his groin, and doesn’t hear him.

A smack on her head does the job. He jumps up, and starts looking for his clothes. She remains there on the ground, curled on herself, panting.

‘This is so fucking boring,’ he says, eyes closed, shower pouring onto his face, arms, and shoulders. ‘We’re lucky now if we find our way back throughout this no-man’s-land.’ The warmth and softness of her fat body slides off his skin little by little, taken away by the cold drops of rain. Suddenly, he is sorry because of all this dirt and cold, because of having started this trip without Emma, and because of other things he can’t really pick up now.

‘Fuck it. Let’s go back to the camp,’ he says, and looks around. He sees Zoe’s clothes littered, crumpled on the ground.

‘Zoe! Zoe! Where are you?’ His voice exposes his fear, as he begins to realise that he’ll never find a proper way of telling Emma I’m sorry. He’s lost her, and that’s just where he is now. ‘You, mud-covered, filthy creature!’

*

There is a beautiful light over the mountain. A sad, yellow-gray hallow filtered by the thin blanket of clouds. The rain has just stopped, and the sun hasn't broken in yet. On the other side of the mountain, there is a little trail unknown to the human foot. Black goats follow it down to the little river in the valley through jagged rocks and high walls. Right now, there are several wolves in the valley, but the goats had their watering already, and the wolves can't climb up where the goats are.

One of the baby goats has broken a leg today. He should die soon.

From the chair where she is comfortably seated, Zoe can see neither the goats, nor the wolves. There are a million things she can't see from that wooden chair where she enjoys her morning coffee, her first cigarette of the day, and the majestic sadness of the mountain. She can't see the couple of young lovers from the little Bengali village who bathe secretly in a river at moonlight. She can't see the gracious dance of Shiva who uses his thousand arms and thousand legs to destroy and recreate, every single second, the Universe. She can't see the microscopic flow of air, atom after atom, getting in and out of the lungs of the tiny ant that is climbing her left foot right now. She can't see her sister's face, who's been sobbing in her kitchen all day. Zoe wonders why anyone wants to believe they all live their lives together when they all know that, in fact, everyone was born alone and will eventually die alone.

First, she wanted to go away. She didn't want to see Chris anymore, nor any of them. Then anger faded away, replaced by an uncanny, dark sense of peace. She decided to stay. The doctor

recommended that she leave the camp for a hospital down in the city, not so much because of the physical damage but the emotional shock she had suffered.

She decided she wanted to stay. Like when you need to give everyone a chance to face the consequences of one's own actions, and to face one's own demons. Everyone including yourself.

Today, they've gone on a trip to the Green Swamp, including Emma who pretended she was ready for the journey. Initially, Zoe thought about going with them, but then she realized she really needed a rest; she would have the chance to meet all of them tonight anyway.

There is another group of tourists who have arrived today. They seem to be Germans, most of them. Or Swiss. Why would Swiss people go for mountaineering abroad where mountains aren't even as high as in their own country? Perhaps they are biologists or geologists, and came here for scientific investigations. They seem very shy, like when you enter for the first time an unfamiliar house. They keep looking around, finding their way in and around the chalet. Three of them, two boys and a girl, have just seated next to Zoe's table, greeting her with their shiny, genuine faces.

That's funny, Zoe thinks, she's been here only for a day, but she feels like she's a kinda veteran, and she's looking at the newcomers with the eyes of the one who knows too much already. Tomorrow, the German-or-Swiss will start to feel this way, too. They'll get used to the semi-promiscuous showers, to the old traditional toilets — a set of wooden boxes no larger than a pay-phone cabin located some fifty yards away from the chalet — ,

and to the old man who makes a trip to the closest village every day for supplies, which he brings up here on the back of an old donkey: coffee, bread, meat, tea, toilet paper, vegetables, detergent, cigarettes, and God knows what else people need here.

‘Next time you should mention you don’t like sugar in your tea,’ Zoe laughs, craning her head towards the table of the German-or-Swiss group. She has heard them saying *Zucker* several times with a noticeably unpleased tone. ‘They just assume everyone takes sugar with tea.’

‘Yeah, weird habits,’ answers the girl a bit surprised, and smiles. ‘Actually, we should have forseen that, because the same thing happened to us yesterday when we had tea in town.’

She speaks English with a peculiar accent.

‘These guys here are Swiss, like me,’ Christiane says.

Both young men are cute. Daniel is tall and blond. Andreas is shorter, with Spanish features, and doesn’t speak English, Zoe is told. Their group is on a schedule, and they plan to visit five places, and do their research activities in the following days.

It’s midday and the clouds are getting lost. It’s going to be a nice day for those on a trip. But Zoe must stay in the camp. A whole day lost. There is a lake or perhaps a peak that she will never see, because today she has to remain on the camp.

Well, nobody stops her actually to make a trip on her own, it’s just that the doctor recommended her to relax for a while. Who knows, maybe a short trip on her own would relax her even better than a boring day here. To go alone for a three-hour walk isn’t probably the best idea for someone with no experience in mountaineering, but the day looks really fine and there’s no real

danger if you stick to the marked route, and avoid the difficult places. There is a big map on the wall of the chalet with the the important destinations and the main lanes that start from here. Quite easy to read. Each lane is marked with a different sign: a yellow triangle for Peak X; a blue circle with a red border for Lake Y; a red square to Camp Z. The forest is just a few feet away from the building. You can easily spot the sign that you want.

Then you walk. You just walk and keep following your sign, and the path follows you. At first, it's painted on tree trunks. After an hour of walking or so, fir trees disappear, replaced by junipers, but you can still find the sign painted on rocks. It might occur to you to miss the sign; you can't always spot it right away. Then, in a second, you feel like you're somewhere else, in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of a foreign and unwelcoming world. The feeling doesn't last more than ten seconds, because the sign invariably appears in front of you, and the forests and the mountains around become friendly and protective again. When you walk in a group, it's different. You don't have to pay so much attention to the path; you just follow the others. But when you're alone in these huge distances of wild landscape, you know that those little signs are as vital to you as the air that you breathe.

The junipers remain behind, and the path keeps along a river that seems to become thinner with every step that she makes. There's only grass here, scattered little flowers, lichens, and rocks. More and more naked rocks. Then new hills and new walls rise up at distance. Which one should be the destination? The only thing Zoe knows is that there must be a lake right before the highest peak in the whole area, but she can't see any lake yet.

And she knows the trip is supposed to take about three hours. She's been walking for two hours now, so there's still a good way to go. She has only met other people once: a boy and a girl coming the opposite way.

Then, all of a sudden, the lake appears in front of her in a large crater atop of the mountain. The sun is burning, and the wind is strong, and her cheeks hurt. She remembers she has a white hat in her rucksack. She can have a break by the lake, drink some water, and eat her sandwich, before the last part of the journey. The peak is right there, near the lake, some twenty minutes of walk from the lake. There's not even grass around. In the shade of a rock, lies a large patch of snow.

The last part of the walk is the most difficult. The rocks are sharp, and at times Zoe needs a good sense of balance; she avoids looking down, or she risks breaking all her bones by falling over that rugged ridge.

Eventually, she finds herself right on the peak. The mountains are endless, and there's nobody else around. She's in the centre of the universe, the light is strong, and the wind is hot. She could stay here for hours. Or forever. Loneliness can be so beautiful.

The baby goat is dying. He tried to make a quick jump, but his little hoof stumbled, and his body rolled downwards.

'No, let me guess. You can't pay your rent, and your landlord's at your door.'

'It's not that.'

'You've broken a leg or something, and want me to buy groceries for you.'

‘Nope.’

‘Some ugly boy must have broken your heart, and you need a shoulder now to cry on.’

‘Uhm. No.’

‘Then what the fuck is it?’

Kelly is the same old bitch. Nobody would believe they were sisters. They haven’t talked in two months or so. Not because of some fight or anything — in fact, they haven’t had a real fight since they were little girls — , rather it’s that, most of the time, both of them felt they didn’t have much to share and to talk about.

‘I just wanted to know how’re you doing.’

People say mobile phones have no signal in the whole area. Except for the peak itself.

‘Oh.’

‘So how are you doing?’

‘Uhm. Fine. I’ve just landed home from Tesco. And you? You’re all right?’

It’s not environment-friendly at all, but it feels so good to have a cigarette on the top of a mountain.

‘I’m great. I’m on the top of a mountain.’

‘Oh. I thought you’d given up dope.’

The smoke levitates and flies away before Zoe’s eyes, blurring her reality and taking the shape of her thoughts, and guiding her thoughts to unexpected directions.

A tiny red creature has appeared down there, by the lake. Another solitaire walker.

‘Kelly, I have to hang up now. Take care.’

On her way down, Zoe crosses the creature. It's Andreas, who wears professional Swiss equipment. His red coat pops even if he's very far away.

'Hiya. Stunning landscape, isn't it?'

The young man watches her in bewilderment. '*Hallo*,' he answers eventually, and she finds his voice very sexy. Obviously, to have a conversation with Andreas should be no easy job.

'Well, enjoy your trip!'

'*Ciao*,' he says without returning her smile, then begins climbing again.

After a few minutes of walk downhill, she notices the spot.

A few steps off the marked trail, and she's there. The perfect spot. From there, she can see both slopes of the mountain, and she notices that they look surprisingly alike. Both of them enticing, both of them threatening.

She always knew that, if she ever wanted to take her own life, she'd fly off a high mountain peak.

She drops her rucksack, takes a few steps back, then starts running to gain momentum. She flies over the slope of the mountain where, a moment ago, a baby goat with a broken leg has just stopped breathing.

RUNAWAY²

He would wake up one morning at five or four when nobody had been up. He'd leave the building in silence, a little bunch of things upon him. No one would know.

(When you're alone at night, you kind of feel you're the king of the place, don't you? Empty streets, no lights in the windows — that kind of makes you excited like a thief, doesn't it?)

That morning would be chilly. Surreptitiously dim light would leak off the moon. He'd walk up the alleyway, then pass by the sleeping rose shrubs to his left. Down the lane now: three houses before the edge of the forest.

That mass of dark space whispering lost tales. The wind would grow stronger and wipe away his drowsiness. Closer to the trees, he'd slow down.

By the time anyone had noticed his absence, he'd be away.

This is a reality I don't belong — he used to say picturing the details of his getaway fiction. He had a handful of games of that sort. He'd played them alone in bed fixing the ceiling or

²Originally published in the literary magazine "Versal" 3/2005, Amsterdam, pp. 26-27

when tooth brushing. One of them was about trying to get in touch with a different instance of himself — an older him, say, twenty-eight — and to deliver him some deep and vital message.

An older you is always a better you, a wiser you. The you you are going to be in eighteen years' time will know things you can't even figure out now. Try playing versions of this game. Say: I'm getting in touch with the one I'll be in three seconds' time. One. Two. Three. There you are: the other you, the three-seconds-older you.

Or: you hear the noise of a truck outside. The hum is getting louder — the truck must be coming closer. Say then: I am getting in touch with the one I will be by the time this truck's noise will have been completely faded away. You don't know how long this is about to take. Listen on. The noise is getting weaker; you're nearly there. But no: it's growing louder again. There are many roundabouts in the area, a full labyrinth of streets and corners, and who knows what sophisticated principles govern the propagation of sound waves from one building to the other over that chaos of walls and empty spaces, especially when sound is produced by an object in motion along an unpredictable trajectory, as is the case of the truck the humming of which you are observing right now.

Eventually, the sound fades away for good. There you are. The other you. You've just succeeded in bypassing your private time-flow. That's freaky — you think half scared half delighted — how did that happen?

This one game works. It's not a fiction.

It's five o'clock in the morning. Nobody's up yet. He's shav-

ing and studying his face in the bathroom mirror — the same mirror of his childhood, only shabby. He's twenty-eight. An entire life behind. That was freaky, too. I could do it again, he utters examining his teeth (he must see his dentist). This time he could try to get in touch with the one he'd be, say, three seconds before the moment of his death — given the chance, of course, of being conscious in that very moment. He wonders whether playing this version would make him brave or coward.

I'm not prepared to do it, he admits after pondering the matter. But the next second he knows it's too late to back off. Like when you hear the old story of that doctor who gave his patient a medicine and asked him to drink it while not thinking of a white horse because thinking of a white horse would prevent the drug from doing the healing.

It's too late for you, too. You can't run away from playing this runaway game. Choose wisely the message you will deliver.

APPLES AND WALNUTS

‘They might be coming over.’ Rebecca stood up, crossed to the little window, and listened. The cheerful, distant voices crept closer. ‘I must hurry!’

If the neighborhood kids came over to sing their carols, she’d have to open the door to greet them and offer them apples and walnuts. Her heart beat faster when she knew she’d have to do all that by herself. Her father was fixing something in the cattle shed and her mother had gone to visit some relatives and give them a hand, for it was the Christmas Eve and there was lots of work to be done.

Rebecca sat on her three-legged chair warmed by the aged clay oven. She polished the fruits with a cotton tissue and arranged them mindfully in a basket. The voices grew louder right outside the window. She stood up, shivering with anxiety and elation. But the laughter faded away. Why weren’t they coming in? The oil lamp was lit — they should have known someone was in.

It was too early, she realized. Nobody sang carols at that time of the evening. She turned back to her work. She wanted her walnuts and apples to look nice and neat. Her cheeks burned

as a new thought crossed her mind: They could even take her on a carolling journey tonight, couldn't they?

No, they wouldn't. They had never taken her on the Christmas night. She'd be a burden.

Timber crackled in the stove, then there was a knock on the window. Rebecca hurried and threw it wide. Cool wind and snow blew in her face.

'We're going to sing to Aunt Sophia.' It was her cousin. Annie was nine, and went to school when not needed at home. Unlike most kids, Annie played with Rebecca. 'So, do you want to come?'

Rebecca wished she could say yes. 'I can't ask permission. Mom's not here.'

'Come on, it won't take long. You know it isn't far. We'll bring you back in a minute. Ask your dad.'

'He's not here either.'

Annie didn't push further. Rebecca sighed.

'There, your dad's coming!' Then the door hinges creaked. 'Ask him.'

He first mumbled something about Aunt Sofia, which Rebecca didn't understand. Then, after some hesitation, he consented. After all, bitter family stories are difficult to explain to kids.

Annie and her two sisters stepped in with joy and fun, but found Rebecca in tears. She had nothing appropriate to put on. Her mother hadn't ironed her linen dress yet.

'Why? You don't need any special clothes! We'll just sing our song, then come back. Who's going to notice what you wear

under your coat anyway?’

She put her woollen coat and shoes on and walked out with them. It wasn’t cold. The fresh snow made a crisp noise under their feet. Aunt Sophia lived just three houses away. She and her husband were among the well-off folks of the village and had no children.

The four little girls sang ‘Three Shepherds.’ Just before the last notes, the door opened and Aunt Sophia welcomed them in. A nice whiff of roasted meat came out. The three sisters burst in and filled up their pockets with apples, walnuts and candies. Sophia, with not a word, turned her back on Rebecca, and followed the children into the house. Abandoned, the blind girl stood on the doorstep.

Leaving the house, the sisters said Happy Christmas, then led Rebecca back home.

That night was deep and empty.

YELLOW³

‘Whe-ere’s my little precious thi-ing?’ Kate’s vocalizing stirred up the baby, who jiggled and fixed her mother with big eyes. ‘Di-id mummy’s sweetheart sleep ni-ice?’

Yvonne noticed how much her friend had changed. Three years, and she was a different person.

‘Look at that! Such a beautiful boy!’ said Yvonne wearing her widest smile. ‘I’m terribly happy for you, darling.’ She gave the baby a closer look. For less than a second her face turned into an awry grin. ‘And those eyes are totally yours!’

With agile movements, the young mother unbuttoned her child’s clothes. ‘I’m sorry dear, I completely forgot about the tea. Why don’t you help yourself while I change him?’

‘You must be so proud,’ said Yvonne stirring the golden liquid in her teacup and watching that pink, fragile body being wiped. The baby was silent.

‘I wonder, err, your baby...’

³Originally published in the literary e-zine ”Local Minds” , 2004, Budapest

The mother didn't let her finish the question. 'Yeah, you bet I'm proud. And wait until you see Jim. Since I gave him a son, he's the happiest man in town.'

'Kate. I might be wrong, but...'

The vocalizing resumed in a higher register. 'Who-o is our little precious bo-oy? He's such a very good kid. So tranquil and... well behaved.'

'Does he talk?'

'Not yet, of course.'

'What did you say his age was?'

'Come on dear, what are you trying to say there?' The infant was asleep again. She kissed him affectionately.

'Well, this baby seems a bit like...'

Kate tossed her friend a chilly gaze. 'Like what?'

'Like... weak.'

The mother wrinkled her lips and looked away.

Yvonne went on. 'His body appears a little... underdeveloped. Have you had your doctor see him recently?'

Kate struggled for a soft voice. 'Don't be ridiculous. Jim and I are good parents. Our child has everything he needs.'

'Well, that baby is definitely not okay! You're not even aware of that? He's so thin, so apathetic.' Then she halted, ashamed.

'Don't talk to me like that! How many children have you raised so far? You have no expertise in the field, miss! And don't you sell me that ingenuous face! I know you've always dreamed you'd raise Jim's children! You hate me for being with him! And now you're scattering your malice over my baby!'

Yvonne wished she were not there. 'What on earth are you

talking about?' she whispered, then rose all of a sudden. Her tea spilled over the yellow tablecloth. As she rushed towards the door, she felt there was truth on Kate's tongue.

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